

Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare

Thomas Rid (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020), Kindle edition.

Information Wars: How We Lost the Global Battle Against Disinformation

Richard Stengel (Grove Atlantic, 2019). 355 pp.

Reviewed by J. E. Leonardson

Active Measures

We live in an age of disinformation. Everywhere we turn, it seems, conspiracy theories, invented stories, and outright lies compete with—and often overwhelm—traditional liberal democratic ideas of objectivity and truth. Many see this as largely a new phenomenon, one that has sprouted in the past decade or two as the internet has provided malign actors with new tools of unprecedented power. Such is not the case, however. State-sponsored covert influence operations (as distinct from their public affairs efforts or open propaganda) began a century ago, pioneered by the nascent Bolshevik regime. Two new books, one by a German-born political scientist and the other by a former US under secretary of state for public diplomacy and public affairs, look at the history of these operations and the challenges that democratic societies face in countering them.

Thomas Rid's *Active Measures* is a comprehensive history of disinformation and influence operations during the past 100 years. Rid, who teaches at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, begins his account with the Trust, the Cheka's extraordinary operation in the early 1920s to destroy the exiled tsarist opposition. He then follows Soviet and Russian disinformation operations through four major phases—the early and freewheeling influence operations of the 1920s and 30s; the professionalized operations of the first half of the Cold War; the large, bureaucratic active measures of the 1970s and 80s; and then, after a lull in the 1990s, the transition to the internet-based operations of today. Given the Soviet Union's dominant role in creating this form of political warfare, Rid's history is Moscow-centric, though he adds a good deal of information about little-known US operations in Berlin during the 1950s. Curiously, however, Rid has little to say about the Congress for Cultural Freedom and other CIA operations to support Western anti-communist intellectuals.

Rid emphasizes that the Soviets' most successful information operations did not rely exclusively on lies or forgeries. Instead, they generally were built on foundations of truth that lent credibility to small amounts of added-on falsehoods. The best parts of the book are where Rid describes individual operations to show how this method worked in practice. In one notable case, the KGB leaked documents stolen by Robert Lee Johnson, who had spied for the Russians from the early 1960s, when he was a US Army courier in Europe, until he was arrested in 1964. Later in the decade the KGB leaked to left-wing journalists copies of documents Johnson had provided on US contingency plans for using nuclear weapons in Europe; the Soviets added only one small change of their own, a paragraph "authorizing" local commanders to use small nuclear weapons in friendly and neutral countries. The US Government claimed that Moscow was circulating forgeries but, afraid of violating its own classification rules, would not specify what part of the package was fake, thus leaving the field to the Soviets.

The documents circulated for years, giving the KGB what Rid calls a "disinformation gold mine" that played on anti-US and antinuclear sentiments to sow division in the West. The operation also was typical in how it took advantage of journalists who, while not agents of the KGB or even necessarily sympathetic to Moscow, were anti-American enough not to ask too many questions about what arrived in the mail. Even if the documents contained forgeries, wrote one magazine, they were "near enough to the truth to be accepted"—"truthiness" before its time.

The Soviets continued to refine the art of leak-and-forge and the use of credulous journalists to exploit preexisting prejudices, suspicions, and fault lines in Western politics and culture. Rid's account of how in the 1980s the KGB spread the claim that the US government had created the AIDS virus is especially telling. He points out that accusations of government culpability arose first

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in 1983 among activists in the US gay community who were intensely suspicious of a political system that they believed treated them as outcasts. The KGB, anxious to distract the world from reports about the Soviet use of chemical weapons in Afghanistan, saw an opportunity and quickly planted the claim in an Indian newspaper by sending an anonymous letter from a “well-known American scientist” that placed the AIDS story within the history of unethical government medical experiments in the 1960s and 1970s, thus making AIDS seem to be just the latest such episode.

It took several years for the claim to make its way into the mainstream Western and US media, but by 1987 “tireless repetition” brought it from India to fringe activists in the United States and, finally, to “many millions of American households as prime-time evening news” on a major network. Beyond the gay community, Rid describes how the story resonated especially among African-Americans, whose community had long memories of having been the unwitting subjects of medical experiments. Overall, he concludes, the AIDS story likely was the most successful active measure of the 1980s.

From the 1960s onward, moreover, the Soviets enlisted other bloc intelligence services to assist in their efforts. The East Germans, no one will be surprised to learn, were the most effective, and Rid provides an informative overview of several Stasi and HVA operations that probably will be unfamiliar to American readers, particularly those born after the collapse of the Soviet bloc.

The levels of detail in *Active Measures*’s Cold War-era case histories reflect the thoroughness of Rid’s research. He combines declassified CIA records and documents released by Moscow (including official SVR histories), with material from East German and other former bloc countries’ archives—because of close cooperation of the bloc services, copies of documents still locked away in Moscow or destroyed by one eastern service often are available in another country’s archives—and interviews with retired East European intelligence officers.

Unfortunately, much of what Rid describes in the last section of *Active Measures*, where he covers the recent shift in information operations to the internet, comes from media reports and therefore lacks the depth provided by archival research. Still, Rid makes good points, starting with the observation that internet-based operations continue to use the classic method of leaking genuine information (with a small leavening of forgery) to unquestioning

journalists eager for a story, anti-American collaborators such as Wikileaks, and broader audiences looking for confirmation of their beliefs or support for their grievances. Many of these efforts, too, are undertaken by amateur surrogates, such as the young trolls at Russia’s Internet Research Agency (IRA) who spend their days posting on social media, rather than intelligence officers specializing in active measures.

Rid’s evaluation of internet-based operations’ effects also is spot on. Instead of having to wait months or even years for a story to spread, as it took for the AIDS campaign, disinformation now spreads from the far corners to the internet to the mainstream media in days, or even hours. In one case, Rid recounts how the New York Times reported on an advertisement created by the IRA during the 2016 campaign to disparage Hillary Clinton, which then led “scores of news outlets, national and international,” to pick up the story and reproduce the image.

The episode, he concludes, “epitomized how mainstream press coverage generated the actual effect of a disinformation operation ... social media had actually increased the significance of traditional journalism as an amplifier of disinformation operations.” (Emphasis in the original.) Adding to this, Rid points out, are changes in the media environment that have affected traditional, high-quality news organizations. Reporters who used to check their facts carefully now are “worn down by break-neck news cycles [and therefore even] more receptive to covering leaked, compromising material of questionable prove- nance.” Indeed, one can only imagine the opportunities created by the recent Covid-19 pandemic.

Information Wars

In contrast to Rid’s analytical approach, Richard Stengel’s *Information Wars* is a personal memoir of public diplomacy in the time of internet operations. In fact, Stengel’s is three books in one. On one level, it is the former under secretary’s account of his time at the State Department. Stengel was the editor of *Time* when Secretary of State John Kerry personally asked him in 2013 to take the public diplomacy job. After enduring the confirmation process—itsself worth a short memoir—Stengel arrived in Washington to face the multiple challenges of modernizing State’s public diplomacy apparatus, which was woefully out of date in the age of social media and Twitter—and doing so while under the

sophisticated twin propaganda assaults of ISIS and then Russia. It was, to say the least, a tall order.

Much of what Stengel has to say about State revolves around what he believes to be the department's institutional problems. Stengel never felt at home at State or lost his sense of being an outsider, which enables him to look at it with an unrelentingly critical eye. In Stengel's telling, the department is a place that observes the world rather than acts to shape it; where meetings are ends in themselves; almost any officer can block a policy initiative; and, rather than being final, policy decisions can be endlessly relitigated. In Stengel's view, a few State officers are energetic and dedicated to fulfilling their missions, but he believes the majority to be cautious careerists who are most concerned about arranging their next assignment. Worse, he asserts, the system wastes talent. Commenting on the limited lengths of Foreign Service tours, he notes that "if I spent two years training a correspondent to speak Mandarin, I'd want that darn reporter to spend more than three years in Shanghai." (14)

On a second level, *Information Wars* is a primer on the new world of digital disinformation and anti-democratic propaganda. This is the least informative part of the book, if only because Stengel's understanding of active measures is superficial. Much of what he points out, such as that disinformation is based on the simple tactics of accusing your adversary of doing what you are doing, planting false stories, and repeating baseless charges nonstop, has been known for decades; Stengel shows little awareness of the long history of active measures or how the Soviets and their allies conducted them during the Cold War, let alone how the US countered and fought back. (In fairness, Stengel is not alone in this. I attended a meeting in 2015 with staffers from the National Security Council who sought advice on how to counter Russian active measures, and it was clear that none of them were aware of this history.)

The third strand of Stengel's memoir reflects his depressing view of the US government's capabilities. It's not news that terrorists and dictators can spread their lies faster and more effectively than ever or that the State Department faces numerous difficulties in dealing with this problem. Unfortunately, however, Stengel believes the US government as a whole has sunk into paralysis and unable to mobilize even a fraction of its vast resources to fight an information war. Hostile messages move too fast

and too nimbly—trolls at the IRA do not have to coordinate their tweets with various desks or agencies before releasing them—for the US bureaucracy to have any hope of keeping up. Still, by the final months of the Obama administration, Stengel was proud of the modest progress he had made, especially in beefing up State's messaging and creating a partnership with the United Arab Emirates to counter ISIS. Stengel feared that the outcome of the 2016 presidential election would undo much of his hard work. He had believed in the United States as an inspirational city on a hill, but "now it seemed to be gone." (286)

In Sum

Anyone reading these two books—and both are worthwhile for their different perspectives—will start to wonder what is to be done about the problem of uncontrolled false information. Rid does not offer explicit recommendations but, true to his academic roots, concludes *Active Measures* with a discussion of the link between the rise of academic postmodernism, with its denial of absolute truth, and the growing problem of disinformation. Journalists, Rid argues, have become "either unable or unwilling to assess the data on their merits, or in the context of a history that had largely been forgotten," which suggests that if he had to come up with a solution, it would start with working to shift the intellectual climate back toward traditional liberal democratic values the teaching of history.

Stengel, as a policy veteran, looks for more focused solutions. Most of his proposals—greater transparency by media organizations, reforming internet advertising practices and banning clickbait stories, and using artificial intelligence to filter out fabrications—sound useful but are unlikely to work for long, given the ease with which they could be circumvented. More promising is his call to reform the Communications Decency Act, which currently gives web platforms immunity from lawsuits regarding the content posted on their sites. Treating Facebook, Twitter, and various aggregators as traditional publishers, he believes, would force them to begin serious policing of content and be an important first step in fighting the plague of disinformation.

Rid's and Stengel's common implication is that much needs to be done to improve journalists' awareness of

how information operations work so they will not be so easily manipulated. This will not be easy, to say the least, as it will require intelligence agencies, journalists, and technology workers to overcome their suspicions of one another and cooperate over the long term. Whatever the

difficulties, however, *Active Measures and Information Wars* make convincing cases that democratic societies need to take serious steps to confront and reduce the effects of disinformation and hostile influence operations.



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